

New head leads Fairtrade Label SA in achieving 2017 goals

By  Cari Coetzee

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Executive Director Leán Muller has recently been appointed as the new head to direct Fairtrade Label in accomplishing the vast goals it has set for 2017. The NGO aims to raise awareness and develop the local market for Fairtrade products, with a special focus on local and African goods. We talked to Terblanche about her role and what Fairtrade has planned for the year ahead.



Leán Muller

What's new with Fairtrade SA?

Fairtrade Label South Africa's vision is to be the leading organisation promoting sustainable production of commodities, as well as the sustainable consumption thereof. A ground-breaking consumer campaign, [Labelwise](#), was launched in October 2016 with partners Marine Stewardship Council, Forest Stewardship Council and Fair Trade Tourism. Recognised as some of the world's most credible eco and social labels, the collaboration was aimed at helping everyday shoppers identify products that are kind to our planet and foster a more ethical society, simply by making them aware of the different sustainability labels that exist.

This year we will launch a call to action with the Labelwise campaign – challenging consumers to ask their schools, universities, workplaces and local government: "Are you Labelwise?" Whether you're looking for anything from paper to loo roll, coffee to wine, seafood to holiday destinations, our ultimate goal is to increase the South African demand for environmentally sustainable and ethical goods and services.

What is Fairtrade's vision for 2017? Is there any particular sectors/areas you will be focusing on?

We have a strong focus on the wine sector this year. South Africa is the largest producer of Fairtrade certified wine globally, producing more than 66% of the world's Fairtrade wine. This presents a unique opportunity for social development and transformation initiatives in South Africa. In 2015, farm workers and smallholder farmers in South Africa (across the fruit, wine, sugar and tea sectors) earned over R19m in development premium through local and international sales, with only R5m in premium generated in South Africa.

Our vision is to grow this figure by creating more awareness for the producers and workers on the local market. We will also be announcing a new wine offer this year, making it more attractive for Fairtrade certified farms to label not only for export but also in the local market.

■ *What's on your wishlist for brand objectives for 2017?*

With the support of the Switch Africa Green fund, we launched a subsidisation model to improve Fairtrade certification accessibility for SMMEs. Despite making a substantial contribution to GDP and employment, South African SMMEs are the most vulnerable to market challenges – with an estimated 70% to 80% of SMMEs failing within the first five years of operation. Fairtrade certification provides SMMEs with access to both local and international sustainable markets through Fairtrade labelling, and to marketing services by Fairtrade.

Successful promotion of sustainable consumption and production in South Africa cannot bypass the development of SMMEs, which have the potential to supply the market with Fairtrade products. Our wish is to empower more SMMEs to access Fairtrade markets, leading to increased supply and sales of Fairtrade products in South Africa and increased social, environmental and financial returns for Fairtrade beneficiaries.



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▣ ***What do you see currently as the main challenges and or opportunities for your brand sector?***

The main challenge in our sector is the current lack of retail support, as seen by the limited shelf space allocated for Fairtrade certified products. Should retailers stock more ethical products, consumers have greater access to sustainable products and this, in turn, would provide a much bigger incentive for more producers to certify and label Fairtrade.

The majority of South Africa's bigger retailers pursue token sustainability agendas and do not make any real commitment to sustainable and ethical trade. Fairtrade provides a credible and effective means to achieve corporate sustainability goals - with more retailers supporting and promoting Fairtrade, it will provide more opportunity for Fairtrade certified business to sell their products, and more premium would go back to the small producers and farm workers.

There is also very low consumer awareness of the dominant role the retailer plays in the supply chain. If more consumers challenge their supermarkets to stock eco/social labels, retailers will be under more pressure to respond. We have seen time and again that the South African consumer can play a powerful role in holding retailers to account – we just need more of that fervour and action to support our cause.

“ Fairtrade gives the consumer a very easy way to make a difference with their shopping basket; it offers a meaningful and transparent way of directly supporting small producers and farm workers in South Africa. ”

■ **What do you love most about the South African consumer and how they interact with and support Fairtrade? And, what is the greatest challenge the South African consumer presents?**

The South African consumer can be a critical consumer provided they are informed about the products they buy, hence we drive consumer education campaigns that focus on the importance of sustainable consumption and production. Our Fairtrade consumer base is incredibly loyal and will go out of their way to buy ethical products. They will also challenge retailers, restaurants, hotels and other outlets if the Fairtrade products are not on offer – which is what Fairtrade really needs. We need civil society to help us drive our mission for more fair, equitable and sustainable trade.

One of the greatest challenges we are faced with are the high levels of poverty and inequality in South Africa. It seems superfluous to be marketing fair and sustainable products in a country where so many people live beneath the poverty line, but if more middle-class consumers can buy fairly traded products, it directly translates to more income and better working conditions for the poor smallholder farmers and farm workers. Fairtrade gives the consumer a very easy way to make a difference with their shopping basket; it offers a meaningful and transparent way of directly supporting small producers and farm workers in South Africa.

■ **What inspires you personally and how do your passions and inspirations link to the work you'll be doing at Fairtrade?**

I am a passionate South African who believes in equality and building a better society for all through my work. I was very fortunate to have worked on pioneering social, environmental and enterprise development projects, seeing the impact of thoughtfully designed conservation, education and sustainability programmes first hand.

South Africans have so much talent, heart, and potential, but unequal access to resources and education make it hard for the majority of our population to break free from the poverty cycle. It is imperative that we look at all sectors of society to align their business, social and personal activities towards a more equal and just system.

I see Fairtrade with its mission of promoting ethical trade, as a meaningful way of creating this change. I firmly believe that mobilising producers, consumers, retail and government to endorse and support ethical trade, is a way to a more equal and empowered nation, as well as a more green economy. Fairtrade presents the opportunity for retailers and corporates to conduct business in a fair and ethical way, it offers small producers access to global markets, empowerment for rural farm workers, and the consumer can make an easy choice to promote sustainable livelihoods with their shopping basket.

ABOUT CARI COETZEE

Cari Coetzee is a contributor to Bizcommunity Tourism, Agriculture and Lifestyle.
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